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ABSTRACT

The value of creative writing instruction for educable mentally handicapped adolescents is considered and suggestions are provided regarding the development of creative writing activities. Suggestions touch on the students' needs for success, age-appropriate materials, continuity to strengthen concepts of cause and effects, and help in social relationships. A list of suggestions for creative writing activities is provided that presents information on procedures, student responses, and objectives for activities to promote word association, narrative skill, and responses to art. It is suggested that the teacher's role is one of an evaluator of students' strengths rather than one of a corrector of writing samples. (CL)

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Planning Creative Writing Activities For Educable Mentally Handicapped Adolescents

Felicia Mitchell

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Introduction

Modern educators have recognized the value of simple writing exercises for educable mentally handicapped (EMH) children. As early as 1930, for example, Annie Dolman Inskeep suggested that "written descriptions of buildings, persons, and of simple processes in handwork will help the child to become attentive and observant" (p. 99). Similarly, the focus in language education for mildly handicapped adolescents is also geared toward practical activities that will aid pupils in career and life situations. Useful exercises in vocabulary building or oral communication skills may be supplemented, however, by creative writing activities designed especially for mentally handicapped students.

Because adolescence is traditionally a time of uncertainty and confusion for young people of all capabilities, such activities may be just as valuable in building self-confidence as in teaching different ways to use words. Creativity is strongly linked to self-concept in the mentally handicapped. In response to a recent study of this fact, Uno and Leonardson have stated "relationships among creativity, self-concept, and personal experiences operate in similar ways at

both ends of the intellectual continuum" (1980, p. 219). Since students in special and mainstreamed classes have the same social and emotional needs as their brighter peers, it is important for teachers of the educable mentally handicapped to develop activities especially suited to the needs, capabilities, and interests of their pupils.

The Need for Creative Writing Activities

Although mildly mentally handicapped adolescents learn at slower rates and require lower levels of instruction than other students of their same chronological age, they are capable of responding to lessons with as much potential as students of their same mental age. Higher anxiety levels, as well as difficulty structuring emotional responses, do tend to set them apart in the educational system so they work best in low pressure settings with individualized instruction. Even with specialized instruction, because of low intelligence quotients (50-70), EMH students still exhibit problems in developing language-related skills and are "less adequate than their normal age CA peers in the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects of language" (Blake, 1974, pp. 22-23). Short attention spans, weak memories, and difficulty with word associations detract from the learning process. Vocabulary building is slow. Divergent thinking patterns, which further confuse language usage, also tend to surface in high school age EMH pupils.

Regardless of their problems in the classroom, EMH students grow

into adults who will be performing socially and economically in much the same way as their peers. Their social and emotional needs are much the same as those of intellectually normal pupils because, unlike more severely handicapped people, they often end up living apart from families and institutions. Consequently, their inability to develop as masterfully as normal adolescents in language should not detract from the ideals of their program of study.

The adolescent EMH pupil is at a disadvantage emotionally when he or she enters the classroom. As a teenager, the special pupil has reached relative intellectual maturity. More processes, words, and facts may be committed to memory, with some effort, but the ability to develop finer patterns of thinking will never emerge. As a child, the EMH pupil may have been too concerned with struggling to learn to read, write, and calculate to consider a relationship to society and also may have more closely resembled peers in superficial ways. The teenager, on the other hand, may begin to feel different or set apart once basic skills are mastered even though teachers respect ability and focus on career preparedness and life situations to prepare the student for leaving school. The language teacher accordingly structures lessons around resources such as Schilit and Caldwell's "list of essential career/vocational words for mentally retarded students" (1980).

At the same time, self-image may deteriorate as normal school-mates become excited about the myriad of opportunities open to the intellectually able. Yet for all practical purposes, the EMH

student is just as much a young adult. He or she will probably secure a job, leave home, have a family, perform culturally significant tasks. Nonetheless, EMH adults are not as stable in keeping jobs and tend to have some difficulty with the law and community mores. This phenomenon may inaccurately be traced to the mental handicap while the EMH individual is in fact capable of learning right and wrong. It should be blamed instead in part on the failure of teachers to prepare EMH individuals to enter society with a supportive sense of self-worth. The EMH pupil thus must be exposed to activities above and beyond the regular program of instruction during adolescence. One alternative is the introduction of creative writing activities into the language classroom.

The nurturing of creativity may not at first consideration seem practicable for EMH pupils since the word itself conjures up images of gifted or above-average students involved in innovative projects. Torrance relates that "many educational psychologists . . . believe that the term 'creativity' is too value laden and should not be used to designate the kinds of behavior involved in . . . teaching children to think creatively" (1972, p. 116). He in turn asserts the concept of creativity "as a natural human process motivated by strong human needs" (1972, p. 116). Demythified, creativity involves nothing more than the act of creating, of making something that was not there before, of accomplishing something no one else can do in quite the same manner.

The relationship between self-esteem and creativity lies in an

individual's realization that he or she has indeed accomplished a unique feat, no matter how minor, in a way that is expressive of his or her own personality. Even the mentally handicapped youth may be drawn into activities that add a sense of accomplishment to an ostensibly simple task. Positive teacher reinforcement of individuality in EMH pupils may ideally draw students into an educational environment in which they are motivated to perform creatively. Simple exercises that utilize language in a creative way may then be linked to both career preparation and social adjustment because a person with a healthy sense of self-worth, regardless of intelligence quotient, is capable of contributing more to the community than a maladjusted person is.

One of the most obvious things a teacher must remember when developing these exercises is that they should be keyed for success; also mandatory is a studied regard for the disparity between chronological and mental ages.

Developing Creative Writing Activities

The adolescent EMH pupil is no more than approximately 12 years old in mental age, which means that activities must be structured to meet arrested intellectual capabilities as well as to satisfy the normal interests of teenagers. Awareness of creative writing processes in children can help the teacher to develop suitable activities but any lessons especially designed for children must be examined carefully and adapted for use by, chronologically speaking, an older

audience. In other words, we must not "teach down to" EMH adolescents.

To encourage and maintain student involvement, the teacher should keep in mind several concepts. Robert M. Smith's suggestions (1974) include:

* The pupil must be ready to participate in the exercise and not be pushed into it.
* The pupil must see some reason for participating in the activity and not be expected to do it just because the teacher requires it.
* The pupil must have already shown some potential for success in related areas in order to be spared unnecessary feelings of failure.
* The goals of the exercise must be realistic and sensitive to individual strengths, weaknesses, and interests.
* The pupil should be allowed as much time as needed to complete an activity.
* The teacher should reinforce immediately any sign, no matter how inconsequential, of achievement.

In addition to respecting these suggestions, the teacher is wise to try to develop exercises that contribute to a learning experience that takes into account and subsequently tries to improve attention span, word associations, short- and long-term memory, vocabulary, and language usage in general.

There are several methods and approaches a teacher must be aware

of when dealing with EMH pupils, some of which are especially applicable to the development of creative writing activities. Gloria Frankum's suggestions (1982) are adapted here:

* Plan activities that relate to various social relationships, i.e. boy-girl, mother-father, neighbor-neighbor, parent-child, etc.
* Develop activities that stress continuity from one point to another in order to strengthen awareness of sequential events and cause and effect.
* Consider the advantages of "acting out" and role playing in strengthening general communication skills.
* Utilize the game approach to make writing fun.
* Show slides, films, pieces of art, and play records to stimulate sensory perceptions and to inspire student responses.
* Encourage group discussion of student writing.
* "Publish" student writing so pupils may share ideas and also so the link between writing and reading will be maintained.

By expecting students to do their best on assignments, it is possible for a teacher to solicit interesting contributions from the pupils. One should never accept shoddy work, of course, so it is important to stress the role of revision and of simply taking time with an assignment. When first efforts seem careless, the teacher should find and encourage strong points to draw the student into further attempts. Too much red ink will not aid the writing process and will

ultimately affect the pupil's self-image.

Since teachers should assume their pupils are going to succeed in creative writing assignments, it might be advantageous for them to begin a unit in creative writing with simple word games, group writing, and poetry exercises before moving on to more demanding activities. This way the pattern for success may be established long before the teacher asks the class to write newspaper articles or personal narratives. Such a movement from simple to relatively complex is expressive of research showing "that children's writing appears to show patterns of growth which might reach developmental stages" (McDonnell and Osburn, 1980, p. 311). Growth will be expressed by the "ability to communicate by generating ideas, then relating these ideas in a clear, organized fashion" (McDonnell and Osburn, 1980, p. 311).

Rubin has suggested that this process may be blocked by traditional writing programs that actually impede a "student's ability to write, rather than facilitating its growth" (1980, p. 285). He argues that group activities that isolate the pupil less than standard writing activities do are more conducive to writing progress. Group activities in school can become testing grounds for group interrelations after graduation when the EMH individual will be called upon to perform a cultural role as employee, parent, neighbor, committee member, and so on.

While writing may not always be a focal point of post-graduation activities, success in creative writing can prepare a person to achieve

a self-image that will help him or her fit better into the community; it may also inspire the student to become an avid writer of letters to the editor or simply to home or friends. Obviously it will help the student to feel more at ease in real-life situations that require basic writing skills.

But what about instructive techniques? Books and articles on the subject of creative writing abound. They suggest brainstorming, group writing, non-rhyming poetry, jot lists, and free association, to name just a few activities (Olmo, 1980; Fleisher, 1980; Academic Therapy, 1980). There is no shortage of conceptual material for the writing teacher to utilize. What is scarce is much commentary on creative writing and its relationship to EMH adolescents. Perhaps this is because most writing activities may apply to normal or handicapped individuals.

One teacher, in prefacing a list of creative writing topics, suggests "if you are an English teacher or a mainstream classroom teacher, or a special classroom teacher . . . you are no doubt often trying to get your students to dig down deep into their inner resources and produce a writing assignment" (Academic Therapy, 1980, p. 222). Adapting ideas for use in the EMH classroom, however, requires preparation on the part of the teacher who must, firstly, be aware of the special learning requirements of the educable mentally handicapped and, secondly, be conscious of a variety of interesting ways to stimulate writing. Teachers must not assume that students will "dig down" but instead should focus on activities

that, with teacher involvement, will bring students out of their inner selves to share their personalities with classmates. Also, the product of the assignment should not take on more status than the interactive learning process leading toward and finally reinforcing it. Because the role of creative writing in EMH activities is primarily to enhance self-concepts while strengthening language usage and reaffirming individual worth in group situations, and not particularly to inspire the future Hemingways of the world, a psychologically beneficial educational framework is more important than a literary or grammatical one.

Suggestions for Creative Writing Activities

Each teacher should be responsible for evaluating the needs of a particular group of students. On the other hand, activities need not be altogether original because it is both time-saving and useful to adapt freely from tested suggestions in articles, texts, and other sources. The following is a group of ideas derived from traditional writing exercises. In the EMH classroom, they may not seem to the casual observer much different from what is going on in regular or gifted activities. The main difference lies in the EMH teacher, his or her expectations, and the students' relative capabilities.

Word Association

Teacher: The teacher writes one word on the chalkboard. This word should be one with many personal and social

connotations that all the students will relate to. Examples: love, death, school, home, money, cars.

Pupils: Pupils then volunteer to go to the board to write under the word, in list fashion, another word or short phrase that comes to mind when they see or hear the topical word.

Objective: This exercise allows students to share their feelings on universal subjects, subsequently showing both commonalities and differences. The finished product on the chalkboard will resemble a poem and discussion of how what the students have done resembles poetry may lead into more complicated exercises in writing verse.

Narratives

Teacher: The teacher asks the students to tell her, in writing, what they usually do each day when they leave school. While they work, he or she answers all questions concerning grammar, spelling, and punctuation to release them from the pressure of worrying about errors.

Pupils: Pupils work at their desks at first. After they each complete a paragraph, they should break into smaller groups and share their papers among themselves to help each other clarify weak points that need additional development to make the piece understood. Then the groups will disperse to allow individuals

to clean up writing. Final products should be duplicated and read aloud in class.

Objective: This exercise allows students to work with one piece of writing over a space of time, perhaps a few days, in order to develop ideas and give their work audience appeal. It allows students to work in small groups as individuals with the responsibility of responding to others around them. It also helps the teacher learn more about her pupils' interests. When the paragraphs are duplicated and shared, students learn about one another.

Responses to Art

Teacher: The teacher displays a large color poster of a thought-provoking painting that should be impressionistic, expressionistic, abstract, fantastic, or surreal, but not at all realistic.

Pupils: Students share reactions and opinions about the painting in a class discussion. Then each student should write a review of the painting that includes (a) suggestions on how he or she would have painted it differently or (b) why he or she thinks the artist did what the artist did.

Objective: This exercise allows the teacher to integrate visual stimulation with written responses. It may allow students to share varying perceptions. At the

conclusion of this activity, the poster of the painting should be displayed on a bulletin board with the reviews.

Although these are just a few suggestions, ideas are limitless. Through a sequence of appropriate creative writing activities, the EMH student will be encouraged to emerge with a stronger grasp of oral and written language, as well as a better sense of self-confidence. The creative writing teacher, who will probably be the regular language teacher and not a special instructor, must be aware of this interrelation of communication skills and self-awareness.

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize the role of teacher evaluation in responding to any creative writing activities in the EMH classroom. The teacher should regard his or her role not as a corrector of writing samples but as an evaluator who believes in the value of positive evaluation that identifies strengths of individual students in order to reinforce and encourage a pattern of achievement. This approach is contrasted with negative criticism on the part of a teacher who might perfunctorily mark errors and focus largely on individual weaknesses. The positive approach to teaching writing is organic and dynamic in concept because it encourages growth and allows a more creative development in the classroom, EMH or otherwise. Once students begin enjoying writing, they will also try harder to avoid mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and usage. While EMH

adolescents may be limited in intellectual depth and emotional maturity, they are capable of being inventive about how they express their ideas in unique ways. It is the teacher's role to recognize success in creative writing activities in order to affirm and nurture the relationship between creativity and self-concept.

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